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ABSTRACT

The productive involvement of students in curriculum development can lead to greater student interest in and satisfaction with learning. The dominant view in education today is that students are disruptive agents in the learning process, liable to interrupt teaching for their own purposes. This view results in a learning environment where the teacher lectures or students prepare written assignments. An opposite view is that students are agents that can and must modify lesson content according to their own predilections, perceptions, and attitudes. These two views represent the endpoints of a continuum on which teachers take varying viewpoints and shifting positions. Research has shown that students prefer classroom activities that require their active involvement. Given this, it should be the role of the teacher to facilitate the positive participation of the students as curriculum developers to such an extent that the students become lifelong learners, able to use their minds to think, explore, analyze, and evaluate the instruction they receive. (LP)

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STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: A DIFFERENT VIEW

by
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Paper presented at the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association Annual Meeting (1st, Jackson Hole, WY, October 13-15, 1983).

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STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: A DIFFERENT VIEW

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(Paper presented at the First Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association Meeting--Jackson Hole, WY, October 1983)

American public school classrooms are frequently dull, insipid, "emotionally flat" (Goodlad, 1983) places--particularly at the secondary level--in which pupils passively receive information from talking teachers. The data on which this generalization is based continue to be collected (Jackson, 1968; Brandwein, 1981; Goodlad, 1983; National Commission on Excellence, 1983) and continue to embarass us as educators. Not all classrooms exhibit this lack of joy and excitement, of course, and therein lie grounds for optimism.

Before actually becoming optimistic, however, let us cite once more some of the dreary data, drawing heavily on A Study of Schooling (A Place Called School, Goodlad, 1983). At all levels of schooling, three activities describe between 50 and 60 percent of pupils' learning experiences: Listening to lectures or explanations, doing written work, and preparing for assignments. More active modes of student involvement, including discussion, simulations, watching demonstrations, role-playing, practicing and performing are undertaken only about 10 to 12 percent of the time. (The percentage increases in high school with the addition to the curriculum of more arts, vocational and physical education classes.)

Goodlad and his observers note that about 75 percent of class time is spent on instruction, about 70 percent of this time devoted to talking--generally teacher to students. "Teachers out-talked the entire class of students by a ratio or about three to one" (p. 229). Only about 5 percent of the instructional time fostered students' anticipation that they would have to respond. Less than 1 percent of the teaching time "required some kind of open response involving reasoning or perhaps an opinion from students" (p. 229). The usual response was a simple fact statement in answer to the teacher's question.

Having in mind the data reported above, it should not be difficult for us to understand that typically, when students rate their interest in schooling, they describe classrooms as neither hostile and ugly places, nor as exciting and joyful, but as affectively neutral. However, when they rate schools as to elements of the youth subculture (friendships, etc.) their appraisals rise markedly--so markedly, in fact, that we may be concerned about a disjuncture between what adults think ought to take place in schools and what the students think ought to happen there.

What makes learning monotonous in one instance and exciting and meaningful in another? The kinds of learning activities fostered in dismally unchallenging classrooms are reported by Brandwein (1981) to include:

-using narration, demonstration, and lecture, with students participating solely by note-taking;

-placing pupils in the position of listeners only;

-minimizing the creative powers of students;

-placing sole stress on memorization of content;

-minimizing attempts by students to share opposing opinions or to secure evidence, or to express themselves individually. (Pp. 112-113.)

Our experience as classroom observers and supervisors of student teachers in secondary English, Art, and Home Economics confirms a message we read in the literature on classroom activities: The cause of much of the absence of student involvement is linked to teachers' need for control (Goodlad, 1983; Brandwein, 1981). Furthermore, the importance teachers attach to their having control of practically all decision-making powers in the classroom is likely connected to a faulty view by teachers of the learners' power to be actively involved in the curriculum development process. Affectively and cognitively neutral classrooms exist because teachers fail to facilitate the student's role in curriculum development. The purposes of this paper are to define the student's role in curriculum development and to argue for more productive student involvement in that process.

Students as "potential generators of curriculum and not merely passive recipients of curriculum ends and means" (Goodlad, 1979, p. 345) has only recently been identified as the "personal domain" of curriculum decision-making. This personal domain is of equal importance with other domains such as the "societal," the "institutional," and the "instructional," in a conceptualization Goodlad has developed for guiding curriculum practice and inquiry (Goodlad and Richter, 1966; Goodlad, 1979). Recognition of the personal domain, sometimes referred to as the "experiential" domain, implies that learners can be a starting point for curriculum development. The exciting, even revolutionary, potential of this concept is not made explicit in the works referred to. To consider that a personal or experiential arena of curriculum decision-making exists is to recognize the student as the final arbiter of curriculum content.

Typically, when authors suggest involving the learner in curriculum development, they refer to attempts to secure pupil preferences as to content and sequence of the subject matter prior to teaching, or they refer to

management routines in the organizational realities of schooling (Schmuck, 1980). As such, students are not widely recognized as legitimate decision-makers (Hass, 1980; Fullan and Pomfret, 1977; Phillips and Hawthorne, 1978). Sources of satisfaction through a genuine role in curricular matters are effectively denied students. In today's school, the student's role is peripheral. Of 1,800 secondary students interviewed in Goodlad's study (1983), two-thirds viewed themselves as having no voice in deciding what, when, where, or how about anything relating to curricular matters.

What accounts for this attitude toward student involvement in curriculum decision-making? Ausubel (in Hass, 1980) points out that students lack ability and knowledge to determine what should be taught in the classroom. This appears to be a generally accepted reason. In the present paper, we are not focusing on curriculum development that is management-oriented or that occurs prior to teaching, but on curriculum development that occurs during the teaching process. We maintain that the student's role as curriculum developer is that of a transforming agent. Thus, the question of ability and knowledge is treated very differently when one is considering students as curriculum-transforming agents (during instruction) as compared to considering them as developers of content prior to instruction.

We accept Johnson's (1967) distinction between curriculum and instruction, namely, that curriculum is the intended learning outcome, while instruction is the means by which the former is provided to students. Teaching is said to occur when learners are given an opportunity to engage some aspect of the culture, that is, to engage with the curriculum. Learning, in other words, is a dynamic, idiosyncratic action performed on curriculum (lesson content) by learners, through the medium of instruction. Further, learning is considered to take place when the learner invests content with personal meaning.

We maintain that even when "inappropriate" learning (in the teacher's eyes, perhaps) takes place, the pupil has made a curricular decision. He has made a final determination about the intended learning outcome that is irreversible, at least with respect to the immediately preceding instructional sequence.

Curriculum development is a process that does not end prior to instruction. Learners are agents who attend to subject matter, not necessarily in the way the teacher intends, but in their own, personal ways. Whatever learning eventuates in the several minds of the class members is the final transformation of the curriculum. This transformation process actually begins with the so-called "formal" curriculum recommended at the societal level (federal or state mandates) and continues as the curriculum is changed to a "perceived" curriculum, typically at the district level, to the "operational" curriculum of the classroom teacher, and finally to the "experiential" curriculum in the mind of the student (Goodlad, 1979). Obviously, then, a view of pupils that fails to consider them as agents contributes to instructional behavior that reduces their involvement in learning activities and, consequently, their usefulness as curriculum developers.

Students are agents in the classroom. That is, not only are they capable of making decisions about their learning, they cannot avoid making such decisions. Teachers seem to recognize this when they exhibit concern about controlling the classroom; however, the recognition seems to be negative. Since students can do things that disrupt my teaching (so this view seems to say), I must make sure they are engaging with the content of the lesson on my terms, otherwise the instruction may not proceed according to my plans. One wonders why this view, faithful to a certain reality, but negative, prevails.

As noted earlier, another realistic view of pupils can be considered a positive one: since learners inevitably transform the curriculum according

to a complex of motivations, abilities, and realities I as a teacher cannot fully comprehend, I will arrange the teaching situation such that they are prompted to deal meaningfully with the lesson content. This perception of the student--as an agent transforming curriculum--leads to instructional patterns that in turn lead to learner independence (Brandwein, 1981).

We have, therefore, two views of the learner. First, and apparently the dominant one in schools: Students are agents, yes, but untrustworthy agents, likely to interrupt a teaching sequence for their own purposes (what those purposes might be, and whether they might be linked to important learning, appear to be infrequently raised questions). Second, students are agents who not only can, but must, modify the lesson content according to their own predilections, perceptions, and attention. Having the former view, I bend my efforts through my teaching to dissuading pupils from becoming actively involved. Having the latter perception, I bend my efforts through my teaching to pursuading pupils to become actively involved.

A caveat is in order here. Any characterization of human behavior that suggests that two opposite points of view represent the full extent of all possible options is perforce inaccurate. What we have done, of course, is to represent a continuum by its end points. Thus, in real classrooms not only do different teachers take varying positions on the continuum (from Learner as Potential Disruptor to Learner as Dynamic Agent), but individual teachers shift their viewpoints from time to time.

Recommendation and Potential Research Efforts

Goodlad's (1983) students at all levels reported that they liked learning activities in classrooms that required their involvement. Yet, in a steady progression from early elementary school to high school, actual pupil involvement declined. How strongly linked is this downward spiral to

teacher need-for-control? Apparently teachers can concentrate too much on their teaching, in the sense that they lose their perspective on student learning. What are the strategies and tactics teachers use when they seek to promote active student involvement?

Unfortunately, the answer is all too well known: Teachers take seriously the practice of asking thought-provoking questions and they foster the use of student-originated questions (Postman, 1980; Adler, 1982; Brandwein, 1981); they reduce the individualistic--or competitive--flavor of the classroom by encouraging cooperative learning among class members (Sharan, et al., 1980; Slavin, in press); they develop peer teaching opportunities (Demetrulias, 1982; Brandwein, 1981); they individualize learning (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1983); in general, they engage students in active modes of learning. Why do we say that it is unfortunate that the answer is well-known? Because the ability of teachers to espouse a certain educative approach may substitute for their willingness to use the approach. (See Note 1.)

We confess to being unwilling to elaborate on the various instructional configurations identified above and aimed at solving the uninvolvement problem. Too much has already been written and too little adopted with regard to these practices. However, readers will note that the references given for the various methods are quite recent. Our intent is to highlight the fact that although all of the practices have been recommended for decades--indeed, some may be considered passe' by many--still, current thinking about teaching revives the concepts. Is it possible to see a message in the refusal of these of these methodologies to retire permanently?

If we give credence to Goodlad's (1983) data on classrooms--and we see no reason not to--then useful and interesting research could be done comparing classrooms on dimensions such as the following:

- student satisfaction
- teacher satisfaction
- cognitive level of student learning
- cognitive level of student questions
- nature of pupil involvement in the instructional setting
- learner dependence on, vs. independence from, the teacher

In our view, the role of the teacher should be to facilitate the posi active participation of the student as a curriculum developer to such an extent that she learns how to be a lifetime learner; that she progressively insures her independence from teachers. She needs help in learning to use her mind to think, to explore, to investigate, to analyze, and to evaluate all that goes on instructionally around her.

Note 1

The concept of espoused vs. in-use theories has been examined mos interestingly by Argyris and Schon (1974). The underlying notion is that our perceptions (theories of action, in their words) govern our behavior. Specifically, an individual's professional practice (medical, legal, educational, etc.) springs from the interrelated theories of action he or she holds about the elements of the professional milieu. These theories are of the form, "If. . . then." In effect we say, "in situation S, if you want to achieve consequence C, do A" (p. 5). Now, the interesting point is that persons may verbalize one theory when asked how they would behave under certain circumstances, but actually use a different one in the work setting. The first theory of action is called the

espoused theory and the operational one is called the theory-in-use. Theories of action include assumptions about self, others, the setting, and the connections among action, consequence, and setting. Theories-in-use may or may not be reliable as representations of the behavior they purport to describe. That is, our theory of action may simply be wrong in that it does not conform to reality. This is true for both espoused theories and theories-in-use.

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